Report on the School Advisory Councils Consultation

October 2003

A Learning for Life Initiative

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Executive Summary

School advisory councils (SACs) were first established in Nova Scotia under the new *Education Act* of 1996. Most schools in the province have established school advisory councils. In September 2002, the Department of Education released *Learning for Life*, a plan to improve the quality of education in Nova Scotia. Consultations regarding this plan were held with school boards and with school advisory councils and parent representatives throughout the fall of 2002.

During the consultations, concerns about school advisory councils were identified, and in response, the Minister of Education made a commitment to undertake a review of the roles and responsibilities of SACs to ensure that they have a meaningful voice in support of quality education in Nova Scotia. In the spring of 2003, the discussion paper *Parents and Their Children's Education: Defining Meaningful Roles for School Advisory Councils* was distributed to all school advisory councils, school boards, and partner organizations. Ten focus groups were also held to further explore ways to improve the effectiveness of school advisory councils.

The establishment of school advisory councils is viewed as a very positive step toward providing avenues for enhanced parental and community involvement in schools. SAC members hold strongly the view that they have a valuable role to play in creating an environment where students can succeed. That view is supported by the department and by school boards.

While in many areas, SACs are functioning well and have made strides in school improvement planning, others are at earlier stages in their development and require additional time and support. The department heard many excellent examples of how SACs are carrying out their role successfully. The following five areas requiring improvement were identified to assist all SACs and their members improve their productivity and effectiveness:

- the need to clarify roles and responsibilities in certain areas, in particular the role of the SAC in school improvement planning and selection of the principal
- the need for professional development and improved orientation support to enable SAC members to effectively carry out their responsibilities
- opportunities for SACs to network with each other, in particular within families of schools, or with other schools within the school board
- creating closer working relationships between the SACs and their school board and with the Department of Education
- enhancing parent–school communication to enhance community awareness of the role, value, and function of SACs within the school

The dedication and strong level of commitment held by school advisory council members toward school improvement was illustrated repeatedly throughout the consultation process. Together with our education partners, the department will be working to address those areas of concern to ensure that all SACs have the support and functional capability they need to carry out their roles effectively.

Introduction

The Department of Education has the responsibility for the public school system in Nova Scotia. There are six regional school boards, three district school boards, and one provincial Acadian/Francophone board, Conseil scolaire acadien provincial (CSAP). In support school effectiveness and student success, school advisory councils were established in Nova Scotia under the new *Education Act* of 1996, on a voluntary basis. Councils consisted of 5 to 18 members, including parents, students, teachers, the principal, and the community. At that time, the Department of Education and school boards provided training and orientation sessions for the new councils. In a letter of agreement, the school advisory council, its respective school board, and the Minister of Education set out the composition and responsibilities of the council.

There are 424 schools (not including the adult high schools) and 325 have school advisory councils with signed agreements. Their distribution is shown in the chart below.

School Board	# of Schools	# of SACs	School Board	# of Schools	# of SACs
Annapolis Valley	42	21	Halifax	138	101
Cape Breton–Victoria	53	46	Strait	27	14
Chignecto-Central	85	74	Southwest: South Shore	30	27
CSAP	20	19	Southwest: Tri-County	29	23

In September 2002, the Department of Education released *Learning for Life*, a plan to improve the quality of education in Nova Scotia. The plan outlined action in seven key areas: focus on the early years, teaching basics first, more support for special education, safe and healthy schools, accountability to taxpayers, and informed, involved parents.

Following the release of *Learning for Life*, the Minister of Education met with school boards and with school advisory council and parent representatives across Nova Scotia in late September and early October 2002. During these meetings various issues were raised, including the roles, responsibilities, and effectiveness of SACs. A commitment was made to undertake a review of the roles and responsibilities of SACs to ensure that they have a meaningful voice in support of quality education in Nova Scotia.

Consultation Process

In May 2003, a discussion paper entitled *Parents and Their Children's Education: Defining Meaningful Roles for School Advisory Councils* was distributed to all school advisory councils, school boards, and partner organizations. Response forms were included to canvass views and opinions and to seek suggestions for improvement. A total of 658 completed response forms were returned to the department.

To further the department's understanding of the effectiveness of school advisory councils, 10 focus groups were also held across the province during mid-June. Invitations were extended to 11 school advisory council members in each school board region, representing parents, students, teachers, principals, and the community. The exception to this was the Halifax Regional School Board where, due to the board's large size, two focus groups were held. Individuals were identified by the school board's SAC coordinator, ensuring that the following criteria were met: SAC membership, broad representation by geographic area, school size, and school level. The SAC coordinator of the school board was also invited to participate. Focus groups had an 89 percent participation rate.

One of the 10 focus groups was held for other key educational partners, specifically the Nova Scotia School Boards Association, Nova Scotia Teachers Union, the Fédération des parents acadiens de la Nouvelle-Écosse, and the Nova Scotia Federation of Home and School Associations. Focus groups were facilitated by the regional education officers of the Department of Education. The focus group for the Conseil scolaire acadien provincial was conducted by video teleconference.

School Board	Participants	School Board	Participants
Annapolis Valley	10	Strait	10
Cape Breton–Victoria	13	Southwest: South Shore	11
Chignecto–Central	9	Southwest: Tri-County	11
CSAP	11	Other Educational Partners	4
Halifax (Dartmouth location)	12	Halifax (Halifax location)	12
		Total Participation	103

This report provides a summary of both the information gathered through the written responses and the comments and suggestions heard during the focus groups. It also summarizes the five key issues identified to improve the effectiveness of school advisory councils.

Summary of the Results from the Written Responses

The discussion paper and response forms were distributed to all SACs in early May 2003. The response form was divided into four parts: Question One: Roles of School Advisory Councils; Question Two: Supports for School Advisory Councils; Question Three: Other Issues Related to their Effectiveness; and Question Four: Other Issues for Discussion. The department received 658 completed response forms. This section of the report summarizes the key findings of the responses to the questionnaire, organized by the four main questions noted above.

Question One: Roles of School Advisory Councils

The first question focussed on the roles undertaken by school advisory councils. While specific roles and responsibilities are outlined in the *Education Act*, SACs carry out these roles to varying degrees.

Role	% of Respondents[1] indicating their SAC carries out this role
Develops and recommends to the school board a school improvement plan, in consultation with school staff	81.7%
Advises on the development of school policies that promote academic excellence and a positive learning environment	79.2%
Prepares an annual report	77.8%
Advises the principal and staff of the school on curriculum and programs, school practices, student discipline, fund-raising, and parent-school communication	74.5%
Makes by-laws respecting the election of its members, the conduct of its meetings, and the operation of the school advisory council, subject to the approval of the school board	67%
Advises the school board on curriculum and programs, student support services, policy development, funding, and communications strategies	42.5%
Participates in the selection of the principal of the school by representation on the school board's selection committee	37.6%

While at least three out of four student advisory councils develop school improvement plans, advise on the development of school policies, prepare annual reports, and make by-laws, only 42.5 percent of respondents indicated that their SAC advises the school board on curriculum and programs, student support services, policy development, funding, and communications strategies. Furthermore, fewer than two of every five school advisory councils noted involvement in the selection of the principal.

[1] Please note that all percentages provided in this report are percentages of the responses to the specific question.

SAC members were then asked about the appropriateness and effectiveness of specific roles and the findings are provided below.

Role	Appropriate	Effective	Ineffective	No Involvement	Don't Know
Develops and recommends school improvement plan	98.3%	82.5%	9.6%	6.0%	1.9%
Advises on development of school policies	96.1%	69.9%	15.7%	10.0%	4.5%
Advises principal/staff on parent-school communication	95.0%	75.8%	13.1%	8.6%	2.5%
Makes by-laws	93.7%	67.7%	7.2%	14.2%	11.0%
Prepares annual report	93.1%	66.8%	11.4%	10.1%	11.7%
Advises school board on communication strategies	85.0%	34.6%	19.1%	35.1%	11.2%
Advises principal/staff on school practices	82.3%	59.3%	15.1%	18.8%	6.9%
Advises principal/staff on fund-raising	79.0%	60.7%	11.6%	24.4%	3.2%
Advises school board on policy development	78.0%	34.3%	18.8%	36.2%	10.7%
Advises school board on student-support services	77.8%	33.2%	20.3%	34.3%	12.2%
Advises principal/staff on student discipline	75.7%	54.1%	15.2%	25.8%	4.9%
Participates in selection of principal	70.9%	33.6%	9.2%	40.2%	17.0%
Advises school board on funding	69.0%	26.7%	20.3%	43.4%	9.6%
Advises principal/staff on curriculum/ programs	60.5%	37.1%	21.0%	33.3%	8.6%
Advises school board on curriculum/ programs	59.4%	27.7%	20.2%	40.9%	11.3%

More than 9 out of 10 respondents thought the following roles were appropriate for school advisory councils:

- school improvement planning
- developing school policies
- advising principal/staff on parent-school communications
- making by-laws
- preparing the annual report

Furthermore, these were the same roles respondents believed their SAC carried out most effectively, which was indicated by at least two of every three respondents.

The two least appropriate roles for school advisory councils, according to respondents, related to curriculum and programs. Only three of five respondents indicated that it was appropriate for SACs to advise the principal and school staff, as well as the school board, on curriculum and programs.

One of every five respondents identified their SAC as ineffective in the following roles:

- advising the principal/staff on curriculum/programs
- advising the school board on student-support services
- advising the school board on funding*
- advising the school board on curriculum/programs*
- advising the school board on communications strategies*

Three of these roles (indicated by *) were also most commonly identified as roles in which their SAC had no involvement. More than one-third of respondents indicated no involvement with the following:

- advising the school board on funding
- advising the school board on curriculum/programs
- participating in the selection of the principal
- advising the school board on policy development
- advising the school board on communications strategies

For those SAC roles identified by respondents as being ineffective, respondents were asked to provide recommendations to increase their effectiveness.[2]

Respondents were mostly likely to comment upon the following SAC roles:

- participating in the selection of the principal
- advising the school board on policy development
- advising the school board on student-support services
- advising the principal/staff on fund-raising
- advising on development of school policies

Common suggestions[3] were

- more training for SAC members, particularly related to providing advice to the principal, school staff, and school board concerning curriculum, school policy, and school practices
- more opportunities for input/consultation/participation by the SAC
- increased communication between the SAC and the school board with respect to curriculum/programs, student-support services, policy development, funding, and communication strategies
- more involvement of the SAC in decision making; this was especially prominent in matters involving the school board

Respondents also used this question to provide feedback to the department on roles they felt to be inappropriate for the councils. These included advising on curriculum/programs to both the principal/staff and the school board, advising the principal/staff on student discipline and fund-raising, and participating in the selection of the principal.

[2] Based upon a small proportion of the total responses. Results should be used with caution.

[3] These suggestions represent the categories established for the analysis of this open-ended question. The largest number of responses were frequently in the "other" category, which included a variety of unrelated responses.

Next, respondents were asked to identify any other roles carried out by their school advisory council and to indicate whether or not they felt these were appropriate roles for the council.

Other roles carried out by their SAC were identified by 19.8 percent of all respondents. The largest number of roles were categorized as "other," including traffic policy, lunch programs, grounds safety, dress code, etc. The other more commonly identified roles related to advocacy, advising on building maintenance/new school construction, and advising on financial matters. Of these respondents, 91.2 percent indicated these to be appropriate roles for their SACs.

Finally, school advisory council members were asked to identify other roles that they felt should be undertaken by the council. Only 12 percent of all respondents indicated that there should be additional roles for their SACs. Participation in staffing decisions was a common suggestion.

Question Two: Supports for School Advisory Councils

One aspect of the consultation was to gather information from SAC members on their perception of how well the principal and school staff, their school board, and the Department of Education understand and value the role of school advisory councils and their own roles in support of the SACs. In those instances where SAC members felt that the level of understanding/value was low, they were asked to provide suggestions for improvement. The following table provides a series of statements to which respondents indicated their level of agreement.

Statement	Agree*	Disagree**	Don't Know
Role of the Members of the School Advisory Council			
Members of the SAC understand their role.	76.0%	22.0%	2.0%
Members of the SAC have sufficient and appropriate training to carry out their role.	50.6%	44.8%	4.6%
The SAC has effective avenues to carry out their role with the principal and staff of the school.	83.8%	11.6%	4.6%
The SAC has effective avenues to carry out their role with the school board.	50.5%	32.8%	16.7%
Role of the Principal and School Staff			
The principal of the school understands the role of the SAC.	91.9%	5.5%	2.5%
The school staff understand the role of the SAC.	78.3%	12.7%	9.1%
The principal values the role of the SAC.	90.3%	6.2%	3.4%
The school staff value the role of the SAC.	73.5%	12.5%	13.9%
The principal routinely supports the SAC in carrying out their role.	92.8%	5.2%	2.0%
The school staff routinely support the SAC in carrying out their role.	80.4%	9.8%	9.8%
The SAC is routinely provided with adequate information from the principal to provide meaningful input.	90.4%	7.6%	1.9%
The SAC is routinely provided with adequate time to provide meaningful input.	78.8%	19.5%	1.7%

Statement	Agree*	Disagree**	Don't Know
Role of the School Board			
The school board understands the role of the SAC.	62.2%	10.9%	27.0%
The school board values the role of the SAC.	52.9%	17.1%	29.9%
The school board supports the SAC in carrying out its role.	55.1%	20.7%	24.2%
The SAC is routinely provided with adequate information from the school board to provide meaningful input.	51.9%	31.6%	16.5%
Role of the Department of Education			
The Department of Education values the role of the SAC.	53.7%	11.2%	35.2%
The Department of Education supports the SAC in carrying out its role.	50.3%	15.2%	34.4%
The Department of Education provides adequate direction and support to school boards in encouraging and supporting the role of SACs.	43.5%	16.4%	40.0%

* Includes agree and strongly agree responses
** Includes disagree and strongly disagree responses

The Role of the Members of the School Advisory Council

While three of every four SAC members who responded to this question felt that members of the school advisory council understand their role, only half agreed that members of the school advisory council have sufficient and appropriate training to carry out their role. The most common suggestions for improvement were training/professional development and clarification of roles and responsibilities, supported with an orientation manual/handbook.

More than four of every five respondents agreed that the school advisory council has effective avenues to carry out its role with the principal and staff of the school. For those respondents who disagreed with this statement, building better relationships with their principal and school staff was the most common suggestion for improvement (31.3 percent of respondents to this question).

Only half of the respondents agreed that the school advisory council has effective avenues to carry out its role with the school board. Suggestions for improvement included improved communication between the SAC and their respective school board and the development of better relations between the SAC and the school board. Regular attendance at SAC meetings by the school board member was reported as one way to improve relations and enhance communications.

The Role of the Principal and School Staff

Nine of every 10 respondents agreed that the principal of the school understands, values, and supports the role of the school advisory council. However, a lower percentage of respondents agreed that this was the case with school staff. Of those respondents providing suggestions for improvement, the most common suggestion was to build better relations so the principal and school staff understand and value the role of the school advisory councils.

Nine of every 10 respondents also agreed that the school advisory council is routinely provided with adequate information from the principal to provide meaningful input. A lower percentage of respondents (78.8 percent) agreed that the school advisory council is routinely provided with adequate time to provide meaningful input.

The Role of the School Board

Three of every five respondents agreed that the school board understands the role of the school advisory council; 27 percent of respondents indicated that they did not know if the school board understands its role. Only half of respondents (52.9 percent) agreed that the school board values the role of the school advisory council, with 30 percent indicating that they did not know. Suggestions for improvement are building better relationships and improved communication between the SAC and the school board.

The percentage of respondents who agreed that the school board supports the school advisory council in carrying out its role was also low at 55.1 percent, with 24.2 percent indicating that they did not know. Again, the most common suggestions for improvement were to build better relationships and improved communication between the SAC and the school board and for training/professional development.

Finally, only half of respondents (51.9 percent) agreed that the school advisory council is routinely provided with adequate information from the school board to provide meaningful input. The most common suggestions for improvement were more time to respond, easier access to timely information, and improved communication between the SAC and the school board.

The Role of the Department of Education

Only slightly more than half of respondents (53.7 percent) agreed that the Department of Education values the role of the school advisory council. More than one-third of respondents (35.2 percent) indicated that they did not know if the department values the role of the school advisory council.

Half of respondents (50.3 percent) agreed that the Department of Education supports the school advisory council in carrying out its role, whereas 34.4 percent of respondents did not know. Respondents providing suggestions requested appropriate contact information, more support from the department, and improved communication between the SACs and the department, with regular meetings.

Only 43.5 percent of respondents agreed that the Department of Education provides adequate direction and support to school boards in encouraging and supporting the role of school advisory councils. A relatively high percentage of respondents (40 percent) did not know.

Question Three: Other Issues Related to the Effectiveness of School Advisory Councils

SAC members were asked if the current division of membership among the parents, students, teachers, support staff, community members, and principal is appropriate for an effective school advisory council. Most respondents (89.2 percent) indicated that the current division of membership was appropriate. For those respondents who suggested changes to the mix, the most common suggestions were for greater parental, school staff, and community representation. Some mention was made of the difficulties being experienced in recruiting people to serve on school advisory councils.

SAC members were also asked if they thought their school advisory council has a meaningful voice in decisions affecting the school. Four of every five respondents (82.5 percent) believed that SACs did have a meaningful voice in decisions. Others requested more input into the decision-making process.

The following table identifies the ways school advisory councils share information with the groups they represent:

Information Sharing	% of Respondents
Meetings (formal and informal)	90.4%
Newsletters	61.3%
Phone calls	48.6%
Electronic (e-mail, Web sites, bulletin boards)	44.7%
Notice boards	21.1%
Community gatherings	11.8%

Development of the School Improvement Plan

SAC members were asked who, in consultation with other members of the school community, should take the lead in the development of the school improvement plan: the principal and teachers with support staff or the school advisory council. Two-thirds of respondents (69.3 percent) indicated that their preference was for the principal and teachers with support staff to take the lead in the development of the school improvement plan.

School Community Representation

Most respondents (86.0 percent) believed that their school's advisory council was representative of their school community. Respondents who disagreed made a number of suggestions for improvement, including more promotion within the community to generate more interest and more diversity in the SAC membership, with increased parental and community representation.

Mandatory School Advisory Councils

Three-quarters of respondents (78.4 percent) felt that school advisory councils should be mandatory for all schools. While a very high percentage of schools in Nova Scotia do have school advisory councils (94 percent), currently this is not a mandatory requirement.

Question Four: Other Issues for Discussion

More than a third of respondents (35.4 percent) identified additional issues for discussion. Many of the issues identified support issues already raised earlier in the survey analysis, as well as issues raised at the focus groups, such as orientation/professional development for SAC members, membership recruitment issues, and improved relations/communication with the Department of Education, school board, and school administration. Those issues raised by five or more respondents are noted in the following table.

Category of Comments	# of Comments
Orientation/professional development for SAC members on their roles, school board policies, curriculum, discipline, etc.	40
Membership recruitment issues	25
Improved relations/communications with the Department of Education and school board, and principal and staff	20
More clearly defined roles for SAC members with other educational partners with respect to SACs	19
More influence in the decision-making process/greater participation by SAC in school decisions	17
Information sharing, including with other SACs	17
Orientation for principals/teachers/school board/parents/community about SACs	8
Improved communications with community/parents	5
Advising on fundraising/school finances/school programming	5
Other	147

Profile of Respondents

Respondents to the discussion paper were asked to indicate their primary role on their school advisory council. Respondents to the questionnaire came from a wide variety of perspectives in relation to SACs.

The distribution of respondents by group represented was as follows:

Group Represented	#	(% of Respondents)	Group Represented	#	(% of Respondents)
Parents or guardians	223	(33.9%)	Principal	56	(8.5%)
Students	33	(5.0%)	School board staff	0	(0.0%)
Teachers	92	(14.0%)	School board members	1	(0.2%)
Support staff	35	(5.3%)	Other	15	(2.3%)
Community members	75	(11.4%)	Unidentified	128	(19.5%)

The distribution of respondents by school board was as follows:

School Board	#	(% of Respondents)	School Board	#	(% of Respondents)
Annapolis Valley	29	(4.4%)	Strait	26	(4.0%)
Cape Breton–Victoria	154	(23.4%)	Southwest Regional	3	(0.5%)
Chignecto-Central	115	(17.5%)	Southwest: South Shore	44	(6.7%)
CSAP	15	(2.3%)	Southwest: Tri-County	25	(3.8%)
Halifax	172	(26.1%)	Unidentified	75	(11.4%)

Summary of Focus Groups

As indicated in the Consultation section, 10 focus groups were held during June 2003 as part of the Department of Education's consultation on school advisory councils.

Participants were asked to discuss the following three questions:

Focus Group Question 1
In your view, what do you feel should be the primary roles and responsibilities of the SACs?

Focus Group Question 2
Taking the top 4–5 roles/responsibilities (one at a time), how can the SAC more effectively carry out these roles?

Focus Group Question 3
What steps would you take to build/develop relations with the other educational partners to support the roles of SACs?

Participants appreciated the opportunity to provide input into this consultation and to share information and experiences with other SAC members. Some common topics were professional development for SAC members, communications within their community, role clarification, and relationship building with their respective school boards, other SACs, and the Department of Education. Key elements of these discussions are highlighted below.

Focus Group Question 1. Primary Roles of SACs

Focus group participants were asked what they felt should be the primary roles and responsibilities of the SACs. While there was an extensive list, some of the more frequently heard roles were

- school improvement planning
- communications
- advising on school programs and policies
- selection of the principal
- advocacy
- creating a successful learning environment for students

Many of the questions that arose concerning these primary functions related to defining and clarifying SAC roles and responsibilities. For example, participants asked if SACs are advisors or decision makers. Differing views were held by different participants. Some participants felt that the SACs should take on more of an advocacy role, whereas others felt strongly that school advisory councils are an advisory body only. Participants asked specific questions about the expectations of a volunteer organization.

School Improvement Planning

School improvement planning received considerable discussion and was clearly viewed by participants as an area for SAC involvement. However, participants questioned their specific role. Some participants felt that the role of the SAC was to develop their school's plan, while others felt it was to advise the school administration on a plan developed by school staff. Concerns were raised relating to the amount of time required to develop an effective school improvement plan and the expectations for leadership from the principal.

Communications

Communication was also viewed as being a primary role of the school advisory councils. Some participants described the SACs as a conduit for information amongst the school administration, school community, school board, and Department of Education. SACs were also described as being a "reality check," providing advice and information and gathering suggestions and ideas from the community.

Advising on School Programs and Policies

Advising on school programs and policies was viewed as one of the primary raisons d'être of the school advisory councils. A common description of school advisory councils was that they functioned as a "sounding board." One participant spoke of the "grassroots" beginnings, whereby SACs drew upon their own expertise within the community to serve the unique individual needs of the local school. For example, in some schools, SACs review the discipline policy and act as the Discipline Committee. In other schools, SACs assist in establishing dress code policies, lunch programs, and extracurricular activities.

Selection of School Principal

Participants felt that having a role in the selection of the principal was appropriate. There were questions about how this role was to be carried out, as SAC members reported a variety of experiences. Some SAC members reported participating fully as members of the interview selection team, whereas other SACs were provided the opportunity to supply a few interview questions or served in an observer capacity only. In some instances, SACs were also involved in the hiring process for the vice principal and school secretary.

From the discussions, there appeared to be a high degree of agreement that having the SAC chair/member functioning as a full participant on the interview committee was an appropriate role.

Advocacy

Advocacy was also viewed by some focus group participants as being an appropriate role for SACs. The challenge, of course, is to distinguish between an advisory role and an advocacy role. The discussion focussed on school advisory councils having direct contact with the Department of Education on education-related issues, similar to the activities of a lobby group. Other participants viewed advocacy as an expanded role for SACs and a movement away from being a local council, serving local needs.

Learning Environment

Creating a successful learning environment for students was the overall impetus for being involved with school advisory councils. One participant spoke of "supporting the school in its mission."

Curriculum

One of the roles of SACs under the *Education Act* deals with curriculum. Questions were raised about how SACs can have constructive input into curriculum. Some participants indicated that this was not a role for the SAC (no expertise in this area), whereas others thought it was an important area for SAC involvement, but training was needed to be able to carry out their role.

Participants also identified facilities management/renovations and new school construction as areas where SAC input was sought.

Unique Roles

Some focus groups also identified roles that were unique to a specific board, such as promoting pride in attending a French school. This was an important role for the CSAP SACs; however, it did not come forward as a consideration with the other focus groups. Other unique roles included developing extracurricular activities in order to promote social and cultural life, mentoring students, and advising on financial matters and fund-raising.

Focus Group Question 2. Suggestions for Increased Effectiveness

Focus group participants were asked how SACs could more effectively carry out their roles. Clarification of roles and responsibilities came forward as a common theme, highlighting the need for training/professional development/orientation.

Some specific suggestions included

- development of tools/guides such as training/orientation manuals
- department-led workshops on roles and responsibilities, communications training, and effective meetings
- training for school administrators and school board staff on the roles and responsibilities of SACs and on the importance of developing parental participation as partners in the educational system

Clarification of Roles and Responsibilities

The relationship of SACs to other parent groups was identified as an area requiring role clarification. Focus group participants reported different experiences. It was common to hear that some parents had membership on both the SAC and the parent-teacher or home and school association. Participants wanted to build collaborative relationships. One suggestion for achieving this was to attend each other's meetings.

Effective Communications

Focus group participants emphasized the importance of both internal communication (within the SACs) and external two-way communication with their school administration, their school board, their community, the parents, the students, and the Department of Education.

Some specific suggestions to improve communication included

- meetings with all SAC chairs in the board
- creating opportunities to share with SACs in other boards
- producing brochures/pamphlets for parents explaining the role and activities of SACs, with an emphasis upon using plain language
- regularly reporting SAC activities to the school community
- communications training
- sharing information through teleconferences and an SAC Web site

Effective Working Relationships

Effective working relationships with school administration, school board staff, and the Department of Education are required in order for SACs to function more effectively. Participating in regular meetings with their school board administration and elected members, as well as with the Department of Education was a common suggestion. Participants emphasized the importance of having a reasonable amount of time to respond to requests and to receive responses in return from the school board and Department of Education. One participant suggested modelling SACs after district health authorities for support and training. Another suggestion was to develop a formal process for bringing forward policy proposals from the SAC to school board staff.

Resource Requirements

Focus group participants indicated that they required resources, including a budget, office space, supplies, and dedicated liaison staff persons at both the school board and the Department of Education in order to carry out their roles more effectively.

Effective School Improvement Planning

The importance of the SAC role in school improvement planning was reinforced, but clarification was needed to determine the specific role SACs should play, i.e., advising versus developing and implementing the school improvement plan. Participants felt that their SAC would be more effective with training and resources/assistance from the Department of Education, such as a provincial template or guide and facilitators to help develop the school improvement plan.

Focus Group Question 3. Building Effective Relationships

Focus group participants were asked to identify the educational partners they felt they should build relationships with to better carry out their responsibilities. Much commonality existed among the different focus groups in their responses. The focus group participants promoted a broad list of partnerships including other government departments, community organizations, and post-secondary institutions. Partnerships included

- school administration/staff
- community organizations and businesses
- parents and students
- school board staff and elected members
- Department of Education
- other SACs
- other government departments (Health, Community Services, Justice, etc.)
- PTAs/home and school
- unions
- post-secondary institutions
- law-enforcement agencies
- education-specific organizations and associations

The discussion then focussed on steps to develop and build these relationships. Participants brought forth a wide variety of suggestions, many of which overlap with the section on Effectiveness. They include the following.

Communications/Information Sharing Activities

These suggestions were targeted towards specific groups, i.e., students, parents, school administration, school board, community, other SACs, businesses, and the Department of Education. Suggestions included

- invitations to attend SAC meetings on a regular basis
- invitations to make presentations to the SAC
- hosting SAC meetings at places other than the school to expand their outreach efforts
- hosting regular bi-monthly, semi-annual, or annual meetings with elected school board members, school board chair and superintendent, Department of Education, and other SACs (chairs, within the family of schools)
- circulating newsletters, brochures/pamphlets, SAC minutes, and agendas; setting up a Web site
- developing an e-mail contact list and SAC logo
- conducting presentations to community and service organizations and municipal council
- ensuring that the SAC has a presence at school functions

Suggestions concerning communications activities and information-sharing/collaboration were the most common among all the suggestions made by focus group participants.

Professional Development Activities

Suggestions for professional development included

- training and orientation for SAC members on roles and responsibilities
- training and orientation for school administration and school board administration on roles and responsibilities
- workshops on specific topics, such as the school improvement plan, how to chair a meeting

Relationships between SAC and Other Parent Organizations

Suggestions for building effective relationships included

- clarification of roles and responsibilities
- representation at each other's meetings and on each other's committees
- creating opportunities for SACs within the board to meet

Developing Collaborative Working Relationships

Suggestions included developing collaborative working relationships with

- school itself—support school at school level
- school board—proactive not reactive
- Department of Education
- parents
- students
- community
- post-secondary institutions

Additional Comments

In addition to responses to the specific focus group questions, participants also offered some additional insight into their views of school advisory councils.

Consultation Process

Participants were pleased with the opportunity to meet and discuss SACs. They were concerned about what they can expect in terms of follow-up as a result of the consultation. An expectation has been created that their concerns will be addressed.

While participants did comment that the focus group was a useful exchange for information, there was criticism both of the compressed time frame for the consultation (surveys and focus groups) and of the questionnaire itself (too lengthy).

Recruitment

Some participants identified recruitment as a concern. There have been difficulties in recruiting new members as well as retaining existing members, especially if the members felt their efforts were not valued.

Summary of Identified Issues

Clarification of Roles and Responsibilities

The need to clarify roles and responsibilities was a prominent message during the consultations. Of particular concern were the roles related to school improvement planning and the selection of the principal.

SACs largely felt that they had a strong role to play in school improvement planning in terms of being involved as the process is initiated, identifying some areas for improvement, being provided with regular updates as to progress, and having a role in the approval of the school improvement plan. They also generally felt that the principal and staff should be responsible for preparing the planning documentation.

Although the role is established in legislation, many respondents indicated that their SAC had no involvement in the selection of the principal or had minimal involvement, such as being an observer on the interview team. Clarification is required as to the SAC's role in the hiring process.

Professional Development Opportunities and Resources for SAC Members

Respondents to the survey clearly indicated the need for training to enable SAC members to effectively carry out their responsibilities. Specific suggestions include orientation training for new SAC members, which would be valuable in helping them better understand the role of the SAC and ways in which that role can be carried out; workshops for existing SAC members on various aspects such as effective communications or how to run a meeting; and the development of a manual that would provide resource information for members to draw upon in the course of their duties.

Support for SACs to Network with Each Other

Participants in the consultation process also emphasized the benefits of more information sharing among SACs. Specific suggestions for change included the creation of opportunities for meeting with other SACs within a school board and holding regular meetings within families of schools.

Support from School Boards and the Department of Education

The need for closer working relationships between the SACs and their school boards and with the Department of Education was strongly emphasized throughout the consultation. It was felt that strengthening these relationships would enable the SAC to provide advice more effectively on areas such as student-support services and board policies affecting their school as well improve communications among the SACs, boards, and the department.

Suggestions for improvements included department-led workshops, regular meetings with school board staff and members and Department of Education officials, and an identified contact person within the department.

Enhancing Parent–School Communication

Another key message heard during the consultation was the value of enhancing communication to and from the school community. Many respondents indicated that advising the principal and staff on parent–school communications was an appropriate role for school advisory councils. Furthermore, 85 percent of respondents felt that advising their school boards on communication strategies was an appropriate role for SACs. However, only 35 percent of respondents felt that SACs effectively advise their school boards on communications strategies.

Through the consultation it was also identified that, by enhancing the SAC role in parent-school communication, SAC members could build more support for school advisory councils within their communities. More community awareness and involvement would enable the SAC to better carry out its roles and would encourage others in the community to participate on the council as opportunities arose.

Concluding Comments

The establishment of school advisory councils is viewed as a very positive step toward providing avenues for enhanced parental and community involvement in schools. SAC members hold strongly the view that they have a valuable role to play in creating an environment where students can succeed. That view is supported by the department and by school boards.

While in many areas SACs are functioning well and have made strides in school improvement planning, others are at earlier stages in their development and require additional time and support. The department heard many excellent examples of how SACs are carrying out their roles successfully. Areas requiring improvement were also clearly identified to assist all SACs and their members improve their productivity and effectiveness.

The dedication and strong level of commitment held by school advisory council members toward school improvement was illustrated repeatedly throughout the consultation process. Together with our education partners, the Department of Education will be working to address those areas of concern to ensure that all SACs have the support and functional capability they need to carry out their roles effectively.

NOVA SCOTIA
Department of Education